Christmas Means "I'm OK - You're OK"
Romans 5: 1-8: Ephesians 2:8-10
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As I prepared this sermon it became increasingly apparent that it needed a story to introduce it. The story ought to be real, immediate, but most of all it ought to relate in a very personal way to the experience of those who would hear it. I thought of several incidents in my own experience that did the job beautifully for myself, but they were extremely personal, and probably would lose their impact in the retelling. And so I'm going to ask you to help me get this sermon off the ground by thinking of your very own introductory illustration.

Here are the ground rules. Think of a situation in your own past when you were guilty of hurting someone you loved, a wife or husband, your children, your parents, a dear friend. Recall how lousy you felt about it - your anxiety, your fear of the inevitable confrontation, your suspicion that some irreparable harm may have been done to the relationship of love. And then recall that when the confrontation occurred you discovered that you were forgiven, the other you hurt still accepted you, love was not destroyed. ~~My guess is that everyone here can play back a number of situations such as this.~~ It's an amazing experience - almost unbelievable. It's exhilarating to be free of guilt - to be free of the anxiety and the feeling that somehow we've got to make amends. It's a beautiful experience to know that we are accepted in spite of ourselves: that we are forgiven even before we say "I'm sorry", that we are loved just as we are.

Now, if my suppositions are correct, everyone here has an illustration - perhaps a whole list; and allow me now to tell you what you have an illustration of. The word is "Grace", an idea which is essential to an understanding of the Gospel; an idea, when misunderstood, turns Christianity into something totally alien to the New Testament. ~~Life is full of it: in every life it keeps happening: in small, inconspicuous ways everyone has known the profound goodness of undeserved love.~~

~~The idea of Grace, God's grace to be precise, is the heart of the Gospel.~~ of Jesus Christ. ~~It~~ "Grace" is what is "good" about the good news. ~~It is central even to a rudimentary understanding of Christianity.~~ It is a profoundly simple concept - so simple, in fact, that it is difficult to explain and even more difficult to believe.

The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible defines grace as "God's unmerited, free, spontaneous love for sinful man, revealed and made effective in Jesus Christ." Karl Barth put it personally, in a Christmas sermon to the prisoners in the city jail of Basel, Switzerland. "Christmas is for you. You, regardless of who you are, whether or not you understand the message, whether or not you are good and pious people. The news is meant for you. For your benefit the Christmas story happened" [Deliverance to the Captives p. 23] ~~Complete this footnote and others~~ Harper and Row, New York 1961

Grace is the one word which interprets Jesus Christ - his birth, life, death and resurrection. Jesus Christ was an act of divine grace; that is, his coming into the world, in Bethlehem of Judea, was an expression of the grace of God. Beyond that - or because of that - his ministry was punctuated by object lessons in grace - or unmerited love. A prostitute came to him once, and he accepted her, forgave her, loved her. He made no demands - he tied no strings to his acceptance - he did not require her, or anyone else for that matter, to conform to any ~~visual~~ moral restrictions as a condition for his love. The love was there - it came first: it depended on nothing in its object. That is, it was grace.

He told stories in order to teach the grace of God. A man had two sons. One claimed his inheritance, ran away and squandered every penney in another country. When he returned to his fathers' house - penitent, defeated, humiliated, to ask permission to work as a servant - to ask forgiveness, he discovered that his father's love had not diminished. He was forgiven - even before he asked forgiveness. In fact, the father saw him coming, and ran out to meet him, and embraced him. That's grace.

On another ocassion he told a story about workers in a vineyard. Some labored all day in the sweltering heat. Others came late, near quitting time. At the end of the day the master of the vineyard paid them all the same. That's grace - not dependent on performance; not conditional; not a reward for work well done; but the free gift of one who loves in spite of anything a man has or has not done.

Several decades after Jesus, a man by the name of Paul emerged as the interpreter

and expositor of grace. Time and time again he wrote to the early Christians that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that God's love is a gift, a free gift that cannot be earned or deserved. Men used to be under the law - that is, they lived with the assumption that God's acceptance of them could be earned by unflagging adherence to the rules and regulations which constituted the religious law. No more, said Paul. You are now in a state of grace. God loves you apart from anything you have done: you are free from the law, and the anxiety of continually attempting to prove yourself. You are free to live joyful lives in response to that. Having faith, for Paul, was what a man did in response to God's undeserved love - and it was a radically and gloriously new approach to the whole question of man's relationship with his creator.

The Church of Jesus Christ exists to proclaim and celebrate the good news. Our worship is not an undefined reach toward the heavens by men searching for God, but the response of a group of very happy people who know they are loved. Every week - the Gospel is announced. The new Book of Common Worship prescribes a general Confession ↑ Every week we confess our sin, and at the end of that → which exercise the good news is proclaimed: "God shows his love for us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us..... If a man is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."..... In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." Nothing "iffy" or conditional about that. Regardless of what else happens in worship - or in the sermon - the good news of God's grace is here announced and celebrated. And the happiest moment of our worship ought to be as we respond - " O Lord, open thou our lips

And our mouths shall show forth thy praise.

Praise ye the Lord.

The Lord's name be praised.....Glory be to the Father, and

to the Son and to the Holy Ghost."

And why? Because the very essence of our being in corporate worship here is all tied up in that little liturgical exercise, to be reminded of and to celebrate God's grace - God's love - God's forgiveness.

Thus far we have been thinking in terms that might be called "very basic Theology". And there comes a time in every theological discourse when we must ask

the rude but necessary question - "So what? What has that got to do with me, here and now? What difference does it make?" In a sense, One of the most important tasks of the minister is to answer that rude "So what?" Sunday after Sunday, and so it is not a new goal to which we now must turn. But I discovered, recently, a new approach, a new and very helpful framework in which to discuss what it means to be aware of the grace of God. I discovered it in a book entitled "I'm OK - You're OK", written by Doctor Thomas A. Harris, a California psychiatrist, and an associate of Dr. Eric Berne, author of the best seller "Games People Play". ~~Complete Footnote~~ ?

~~There are many psychiatrists, both Christians and non-Christians, who are discovering that they have a real affinity for Christian theology - that there is a great deal of overlap between the two disciplines - and that the therapist shares a lot in common with the preacher in his pulpit.~~

Harris, Berne and their associates have established a new school of psychiatric thought called Transactional Analysis, ~~and while I certainly am not a psychiatrist~~ I have found ~~in their ideas~~ a very practical way to understand human behavior, and more ~~importantly~~ to the point, and creative a new approach to the question of ~~grace~~ our need for love and acceptance.

Harris sees the human personality in terms of three "ego states". Every person, regardless of age, has a "Parent " ego state, an "Adult" and a "Child". When we are operating as a Parent we are expressing our values, making moral judgements, taking care of others, disciplining and judging. When we are operating as an Adult we are transmitting or receiving information, doing jobs, getting work accomplished. When we are operating as a Child we are having fun, experiencing pleasure, playing, asking to be cared for and loved. ~~The ideal personality has a perfect balance between the three ego states.~~ The healthy person can be parent, child or adult depending on the situation.

Trouble is, not many of us are totally healthy, and none of us is perfect. We operate as a "child" when we should be "adult", or "parent" when the situation calls for child. And One of our problems, says Harris, is that while we are developing our "child", in the earliest days of infancy, the data we are receiving leads us to conclude "I'm not OK - you're OK". Psychiatrists generally agree that this happens to all of us - inevitably. Freud called it the "Birth Trauma", the experience of the new born infant having emerged from ultimate security into a hostile world of loud

unless he perceives "I'm O.K.",

noises, bright light, cold air and rough handling. We know that unless someone makes physical contact with that baby, unless he is stroked and fondled, there is a good possibility he will die.

After one year of life the new person has received all the data he needs to conclude - "I'm not OK - you (the parents) are OK" He has learned to walk alone, that is he's not carried and therefore not fondled enough, he's continually smelling bad, and knowing he should stumbling and falling, and now being hit for crawling out of his crib - or knocking over vases. Something is radically wrong - "I'm not at all OK - but those other people must be."

Harris proposes that that data is recorded permanently, carried into childhood and adulthood; and that many people, perhaps most of us live out our lives ~~trying to~~ hung-up in this insecure child ego-state trying be OK- to earn the love and acceptance of others.

Reuel Howe, another man who has worked extensively in the area of religion and psychology notes that "Anyone who works with people knows how common it is for men and women to have predominantly disparaging feelings toward themselves. They cannot believe in themselves, or that other men or even God accept them.: [p. 104 Man's Need and God's Action] Seabury Press, Greenwich, Conn. 1958

Howe, and others, have said that this need for love and acceptance is the deepest yearning in the human heart - the deepest need we have. And they have said, unequivocally, that this need is largely unmet for most of us.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ ought to be the answer. The Gospel of grace and love and forgiveness. That's a "preacher" statement if there ever was one. But Thomas Harris, the psychiatrist, is the one who said it. "The central message of Christ's ministry was the concept of grace.....The concept of grace.....is a theological way of saying 'I'm OK - you 're OK. It is not you can be OK, if, - or - you will be accepted, ~~unconditionally." [p. 227]~~ check this if. It is - you are accepted -unconditionally." [p 227]

The child must know that he is loved, unconditionally, The child must experience grace, even when he crawls out of the crib, dirties his pants and breaks the best vase. ~~And~~ Somehwere along the line you and I must know that we are loved, accepted, forgiven - not on the basis of what good lives we've lead - but unconditionally.

If we are to be healthy persons, we must know that we are "O.K", and that we don't have to burn ourselves out trying to earn that.

That in an ultimate sense, we are acceptable to the one who created us, and the one with whom we ultimately have to do.

And yet, isn't it strange, the way we are able to take the good news of the Gospel, this grace that says "I'm OK - You're OK", and alter it, and tie strings to it, and make it dependent on all kinds of things like theology and ethics? Isn't it sad, the way we have forced our religion to become a mechanism by which we can earn an "OK" feeling? Isn't it too bad, the way we can turn the grace of God inside out until it sounds like a reward for piety and clean living rather than the joyful, unconditional gift that it is in fact?

Jesus Christ came into the world for that - to reverse this religiosity in us that makes us feel we must earn God's favor: this anxiety that we are not doing enough: this nagging self doubt which stems from our unmet need to be accepted. Jesus Christ came into the world to free men from all of that - literally to liberate men from the oppressive despair that accompanies our sense of not being OK: to free men to live lives of joy in the ultimate security of God's grace. Conclusion written

That's the Gospel. You and I are loved - unconditionally. In God's eyes we are "OK". That's what Christmas means underneath all the tinsel and the commercial bribery.

"To you this day is born in the City of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

To you - to us - a savior. Not because we deserve that - not because we've somehow earned that - but because God's love is unconditional. That's very much worth being happy and celebrating.

The lovely Advent Hymn says it best -

"Come, Thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free
From our fears and sins realease us;
Let us find our rest in Thee."

Amen.